

Philosophy and Sport [Book Review]

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Abstract:

A review of the book "Philosophy and Sport" edited by Anthony O'Hear.

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Article:

Philosophy and Sport resulted from a lecture series held in 2012 by the Royal Institute of Philosophy in Great Britain. As the anthology's editor, Anthony O'Hear, explains, with the 2012 London Olympics in the organization's midst, 'it seemed fitting to consider some of the many philosophical and ethical questions raised by sport' (1). The quality of the analyses is thoughtful, though their novelty and significance to sport philosophy literature varies. The text includes thirteen essays by a total of fourteen authors. The authors cover a wide array of topics and speak most directly to trained philosophers.

One of the best essays is the first. In 'Ways of Watching Sport,' Stephen Mumford argues that sports are designed to facilitate feats of athleticism that people find esthetically pleasing. When athletes 'accept the lusory goal of a sport,' Mumford writes, they 'accept that the contest is to be staged on certain grounds, grounds that will require the exhibition of certain bodily esthetic qualities' (9). In other words, although competitors may want to win, the requisite means to victory are intended to inspire beautiful performances. Many have assumed that since winning is the aim of most sports people, any beauty that emerges in the effort is incidental. Thus, 'partisans' rather than 'purists' view sport 'the right way' (See Dixon 2001). In light of Mumford's argument, however, this may not necessarily be the case.

The following essay titled 'The Martial Arts and Buddhist Philosophy,' by Graham Priest, discusses how '[t]raining in the martial arts of the appropriate kind can itself be a way of treading the Buddhist Path' (21). According to Priest, practicing martial arts involves intense

concentration on ‘one’s body, the position of one’s limbs, the angle and speed of movements’ (26). This type of exercise promotes ‘one-pointedness’ – living in the present and emptying the mind of thought. Such experiences, Priest believes, lead to a loss of one’s sense of self and thereby ‘inner peace.’ Priest unnecessarily frames his argument against the strawman that martial arts and Buddhism contradict each other (because martial arts is about violence and Buddhism is about peace). Still, his explanation of how martial arts can work as a ‘moving meditation’ represents a holistic strategy that could be applied to many sporting endeavors.

In the third essay, ‘Sport as a Moral Practice: An Aristotelian Approach,’ Michael W. Austin attempts to strengthen the common assumption that sport builds character. As he puts it, sport should be viewed as a ‘moral practice’ that cultivates ‘moral and intellectual virtue’ (29–30). Specifically, Austin contends that virtues such as prudence, courage, self-control, and justice can be learned through sport and later transferred to everyday life. Austin goes on to dismantle a number of counterarguments, showing this to be a realistic possibility. Ultimately, however, Austin concedes that his position is contingent on a series of ‘ifs.’ As he writes,

if [people] take sport to be a moral practice, if they are fortunate enough to have moral exemplars to imitate, and if they are intentional about character development via their sport and transferring lessons and habits acquired to other realms of life, then their involvement in sport will be conducive to their flourishing.(43)

If we treated sport as classroom for morality it can become a classroom for morality and that is a good thing. Fair enough. Yet, it seems less difficult to defend this abstraction than to apply it. Perhaps the more important question is: how should sport be organized so that it reaches its normative potential?

In the fourth essay, ‘A Plea for Risk,’ Philip A. Ebert and Simon Robertson narrow their sights on the sport of mountaineering and assert that risk-taking in mountaineering can be justified ‘(in part) *by* and *because* of the risks it involves’ (45). Rather than viewing risks as something climbers put up with to get to other goods, Ebert and Robertson see risk as an integral part of the unique and positive experiences mountain climbing brings to life. ‘[R]isk is not just a means to these other goods,’ the authors write, ‘but a constitutive and ineliminable part of them’ (59). Ebert and Robertson mean that the risk creates a ‘*kind* of exhilaration and fulfillment ... [that] is very different from that generated by ... other activities’ (59). This thesis rings a note very similar (though not exactly the same) to John Russell’s (2005) essay ‘The Value of Dangerous Sport.’

The anthology’s editor, Anthony O’Hear, is the author of the fifth essay, titled ‘Not a Matter of Life and Death?’ The title is more provocative than indicative of its subject. O’Hear poses a basic question: why are sports valuable? His response is multifaceted and balanced. He admits sports are a product of pretense, but defends playing ‘make-believe’ on three grounds. The emotions we experience through sport are genuine. One’s actions have real impacts within the sports we play. And authentic virtues and vices are often exemplified. However, taking an existential turn, O’Hear does not stop there. He goes on to reason that sport is one of the better diversions people will inevitably embrace to avoid looking into ‘the abyss’ of life. For one,

O'Hear contends, sport is honest since it 'does not pretend to be more important than it is' (76). Secondly, O'Hear claims sport is an exciting, relatively safe, and healthy 'escape from the drudgery and drabness in which many are compelled to work and live' (76). Though O'Hear still speculates that for the more serious minded sport will be a waste of time, he provides helpful reflections on why sport is so attractive to so many.

The following essay, 'Sport and Life,' by Paul Snowden, takes on a similar topic, though it proves to be one of the more frustrating of the text. Snowden also aims to uncover what makes sport valuable, but does so by touching various subjects without regard for previous sport philosophy literature. He delves into the metaphysics of sport and competition, for instance, ignoring or unaware of decades of work on the topic (some of which is cited in this very anthology). In another example, Snowden identifies a distinction between 'disinterested and interested spectators,' meaning 'spectators who do not care who wins and those who do' (90). The discussion mirrors Nicholas Dixon's (2001) work on purists and partisans, already prominently featured in Stephen Mumford's essay. When Snowden comes to a conclusion opposed to Mumford's, claiming that esthetic results are 'accidental,' since participants are primarily concerned with winning, one is left scratching one's head, wondering why the presenters at the original lecture series did not respond to each other when it came time to submit their final drafts (93).

The seventh essay is one of the most sophisticated. Timothy Chappell's 'Glory in Sport (and Elsewhere)' is more about glory 'elsewhere' than in sport. Nevertheless, the essay gives sport philosophers interesting ideas to think about. Chappell calls for what he terms more 'flexible modes' of ethical reflection, hoping to get away from liberal duty-obligation paradigms, which he finds limiting. One of his solutions is the implementation of 'glory' as an ethical ideal. Glory, Chappell posits, is 'what happens when a spectacularly excellent performance within a worthwhile form of activity meets the admiration that merits it' (102). Chappell discusses various defenses to this thesis, but perhaps the most applicable and interesting question that arises for sport philosophers is this: should sportspeople actively promote their own recognition when they do something extremely well? Chappell proposal asks individuals not just to strive not for excellence, but to strive to obtain the recognition and appreciation from others.

In the next essay, 'Conceptual Problems with Performance Enhancing Technology in Sport,' by Emily Ryall, 'seeks to lay out some of the contradictions and conceptual problems inherent in elite athletic performance' brought about by new 'developments in technology' (129). Namely, Ryall points to the 'paradox' that elite athletes aim to transcend previous human achievements, while remaining human. We attempt to balance the belief that sport is supposed to be 'a test of the natural human capability,' Ryall writes, 'and at the same time an arena whereby we are able to surpass those limits' (130). After considering three technologies that can enhance human capabilities – genetic engineering, 'therapies' for enhancement, and prosthetics – Ryall predicts that determining which technologies to allow will probably come down to social norms. Meanwhile, as technologies become more advanced, what is considered normal will likely be adjusted. Thus, it appears clear, in Ryall's words, that 'the contradictory logic behind elite athletic performance will [only] become more prominent and more problematic' (143). Dig in

your feet, sport philosophers, for the questions raised by performance enhancement are not going anywhere anytime soon.

The ninth essay by Philip Barlett is titled 'Is Mountaineering a Sport?' but really ought to have been called 'Should Mountaineering become an Olympic Sport?' Mountain climbing's status as a sport is never questioned, though Barlett argues that 'there is very little ground on which mountaineering as currently understood sits easily within the Olympic movement' (157). Barlett reaches this proposition by reasoning that the main purpose of climbing is to achieve a humble perspective of one place in the world, while simultaneously experiencing egocentric exhilaration due to personal accomplishment. Barlett posits this dynamic leads to contentment, satisfaction, and exhilaration. He claims this is unlike performances within Olympic sports, because such experiences cannot be quantified nor are they based on winning and losing.

In the ensuing essay, 'Rivarly in Cricket and Beyond: Healthy or Unhealthy?' Michael Brearley delves into the merits of competition. Although he appears unaware of it, Brearley's reflections lead him to an argument akin to Robert L. Simon's (2010) theory that competition should be viewed as a 'mutual quest for excellence' (24–38). Indeed, as Brearley puts it, in sport '[o]ur opponents ... become our collaborators in the search for excellence' (173). Hence Brearley claims that competition becomes morally justifiable when approached as a cooperative enterprise. This means opponents view each other not just as adversaries, but also as fellow facilitators, agreeing to play the same game by the same rules and put forth their best efforts – making it possible for everyone involved to achieve higher levels of athletic skill.

The subsequent essay, by David Papineau, titled 'In the Zone,' is one of the most polished and convincing of the book. Papineau attempts to understand how and why highly skilled and experienced athletes make inexplicably bad decisions during competition. To do so, he considers psychological theories of skilled behavior. The essay is too detailed to go into fully, but the ultimate result is an analysis about the simultaneous importance of concentration and unconscious processes. As Papineau explains it, when concentration is lost, certain unconscious processes that elite athletes rely on get disrupted. One expects Papineau's essay could prove enlightening to competitors and coaches, as well as sport philosophers.

Heather Reid composed the second to last essay, 'Olympic Sacrifice: A Modern Look at an Ancient Tradition.' Reid argues that 'one of the oldest most venerable traditions in sport [is] individual sacrifice for the benefit of the larger community' (197). She traces this 'humanitarian' tradition back to the ancient Greek Olympics and claims 'it deserves to be revived [in] the modern world' (197). Rather than commercialism, individual fame, and wealth, Olympic athletes should return to their historical and spiritual roots and 'be seen foremost as community servants,' competing on behalf of others and giving back whenever possible (199). This is a magnanimous (albeit idealistic) objective, though one that probably does not need us to recall a nostalgic version of Ancient Greece to become attractive.

The final essay of the anthology is 'Chess, Imagination, and Perceptual Understanding,' by Paul Coates. This deep dive into the phenomenology of chess strategy examines the 'connections between the way that we use our perceptual imagination in sports, and also in chess.' Coates

focuses on how people navigate ‘spatial possibilities’ through both ‘calculation’ and ‘natural instinct’ (211). As Coates elucidates, chess players must be able to understand how pieces move, grasp strategy and tactics, and image latent possibilities. Within this process, players must not only consciously assess possible moves accurately, they must rely on intuition to determine which maneuvers to consider in the first place. Coates goes beyond just sport and applies this analysis to everyday life, asserting that ‘chess provides a model of our perceptual engagement with physical reality’ (235).

Overall *Philosophy and Sport* touches upon a variety of topics of interest to sport philosophers. Perhaps the biggest complaint to be levied is that on occasion authors overlooked relevant work from the sport philosophy literature. This lack of communication between scholars is troubling. Given the efforts put forth in this book, one wonders if journals such as the *Journal of Philosophy of Sport* ought to do more to publicize their content.

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